Diamonds And Rust by Khrysoprase

Category: Danny Phantom
Genre: Age Difference, Butchering Of The Maltese Language, Canon-Typical Violence, Changing Tenses, Codependency, Consensual Underage Sex, Cuddling, Don't Like Don't Read, Emotional Manipulation, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, F/M, Ghosts, Look the sex is not the focus, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Parent/Child Incest, eventually, the point is this horrible man and how he warped Maddie's mind
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Summary:

Maddie's father used to breathe out blue, when ghosts were near.

Or: the story of a ghost hunter, the daughter that idolized him, and the gradual descent into madness and manipulation that led to Maddie psychologically unable to process the existence of half-ghosts while also being unable to stop obsessing over them.

Relationships: Jack Fenton/Maddie Fenton, Maddie Fenton & Vlad Masters, Maddie Fenton/Vincent Mangion (Original Character)
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Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Alright, disclaimers. This fic is going to go over gaslighting, a form of psychological abuse in which one person is made to feel their grip on reality is less steady and reliable than someone else's through sustained manipulation, possessive behaviors, and one profoundly unhealthy, codependent relationship that's not framed as horribly as it should be because Maddie's our POV character for this fic and Maddie is not an unbiased narrator. Please don't think depiction is synonymous with endorsement. And please, don't feel compelled to finish reading this just because you started. If this makes you uncomfortable, back away from it. I will not be offended if you choose to prioritize self-care, I really won't.

I don't have a set update schedule for this because firstly, I'm still behind on one of my other fanfics, and secondly, I cannot fathom this being something that will ever attract a large reader base. But I'll probably get to it once a week or so. The goal is to give insight into four years and distinct moments within Maddie's life to show how she got into ghost hunting, got her head messed with by someone she trusted, and ended up the dedicated scientists/ghost hunter we know. I'm not sure how long this will end up being.

Comments, criticisms, critiques, complaints, compliments, and other feedback is appreciated - although given the subject matter, I'd ask everybody refrain from tasteless jokes in the reviews. That'd be over the line even for someone as into dark comedy as I am in other contexts.

One of Maddie's first memories of her father was of him silently patrolling the house.

When he couldn't sleep, he would move through the house quickly, noiselessly checking every window and door lock, peeking in on both of his daughters, and made all the tiny adjustments to the house his obsessive need for order demanded. More than once, Maddie had woken up to find he'd somehow come in and organized her dolls on their shelf in her sleep or straightened up Alicia's collection of toy frogs into neat rows. He kept the living room similarly immaculate, although he was forbidden to clean up the kitchen by his wife after he rearranged the entire thing on a whim once. Perhaps other children would have found his behavior unsettling, but by the time she was five, Maddie was used to it. Her father wanted to fix everything and to keep them safe. She didn't completely understand the science of his job. She did get that it was dangerous. He needed to make the house ghostproof so that none of the bad ghosts he fought would try to follow him home and go after them. Sometimes he got worried when no one else was, when there was nothing on the news about crime or ghosts to get worried about at all, but that was just how things were.

She understood that when he breathed blue, he was just going to be like that for a while.

What she didn't understand as a child was his need to check the locks and then check in on her or her sister. The paranoia of it went over her head. What monster would be stupid enough to fight Vincent Mangion, Agent of the GIW, in his own home? If there were any monsters under the bed or in the closet, they had probably moved out when he moved in. If he could get ghosts, then he could probably get monsters, too, no matter how late at night they waited to strike. Any ghost with a tiny bit of intelligence would stay far away from her dad. It'd be stupid to challenge somebody who knew that much about ghosts to a fight if you were one. Maddie thought her father was invincible. He was something almost otherworldly, a pale specter of protective energy whose eyes caught the light and seemed bluer than anyone else's and who always, inexplicably, knew when ghosts were in the area. Maddie knew other people were scared of him, but she couldn't bring herself to view him as anything other than her

defender, a man made of magic who sometimes exhaled blue like spinning fairydust into the air and who could vanish in a second. He was practically her guardian angel.

If he was there, she was safe, and more than once, when she found him asleep in the morning on the couch in the living room with a book in his lap, she'd pull the knitted blanket off the back of the couch and place it over him. She couldn't take care of her dad at work because apparently you had to be ten to be a real ghost hunter (her dad said so and he would know the minimum ghost hunting age, since he was one) but she could make sure he was comfy. Sometimes she'd bring him a cup of coffee if he woke up before she left for school. Alicia told Maddie their dad was a grown-up and he didn't need to be babied. Maddie disagreed. Her mom did things for her dad, her dad did things for her mom, so she could be nice to whoever she wanted.

"Science says everybody needs help sometimes," she told her sister, flipping her long braided hair over her shoulder. "So there."

Her dad, a professional scientist, didn't disagree. ***Double*** *so there*, she thought, but didn't say, because that would be mean. The five year old thought her dad might have hugged her a little extra long that morning. Her mom gave her an approving look as they loaded up into the car to go to school. While it wasn't in those words in the science chapter books Maddie had begged her parents for, it sort of was. No scientist did anything alone. Everybody needed teams or at least a partner to double-check stuff for them. The family was like a team of scientists, except they didn't get to wear lab coats or goggles. (She had played dress up in her dad's lab coat before. It was way too long, though. Being short was *the worst*.)

Maybe that day, that ride to school, was when she really started thinking about seriously being a ghost hunter. Really doing it, not just playing dress up, she could stalk the night like her dad sometimes did at work in the field, helping other people help the world. She didn't have any pictures of her dad as a kid, but he said he was small back when he was a kid, too. He also said it was important to be smart than to look good, and she was so smart she'd skipped a whole year of school. The tiny redhead pictured herself peering into a microscope at ectoplasm beside her dad, who she knew would be

proud of her, and smiled to herself. Vincent and Madeleine Mangion: ghost hunters. They'd be like superheroes.

Everybody else was part of the team, but she wanted to be his partner.

Maddie's father always taught her to keep secrets.

"If you share other people's secrets, they'll be afraid to talk to you about other ones," he'd advised her when she came home from first grade with gossip. "To be a good friend, you have to not tell anyone when someone says 'don't tell anyone'."

This was probably what Maddie's mom meant when she said he was too serious. Still, it was good advice to keep people's secrets, because she saw a lot of kids get into fights about that, especially girls. Girls as old as high school had arguments over that sort of thing; she saw that on TV and knew that they could've avoided it if they hadn't said anything. So she tried to be honest and not share things people didn't want shared. Sometimes it was hard, like when she wanted to share silly stories of Alicia with the other girls, but she didn't say a word. If the other girls wouldn't share it, maybe she could have, yet even at six she was aware of the real possibility they wouldn't. Then her sister would get embarrassed and be made fun of and it would be a mess for everybody involved.

There were other kinds of secrets, though, that were easier to keep and which she didn't feel compelled to share with anyone. She never told anybody her father sometimes breathed blue. Maddie wasn't sure if that really happened or if it was just in her dreams. She saw a lot of crazy things in her dreams – her father had gotten her a book on dream meanings, and she knew the crazy stuff would make sense if she wrote it down. But it would just sound crazy to other people, so, without him ever telling her not to mention it, she kept her maybe-dreams maybe-memories to herself. People didn't do that. People didn't exhale anything solid like that, not even when there was something wrong with them, and she didn't seem to be able to catch her dad doing it anymore.

Besides, she had secrets of her own to keep.

Well, okay, *secret*, singular, not secrets, but still, she had one. She didn't want to get married when she got older. (This was not the secret. What she'd realized thinking this over, that was the secret.) She didn't want to kiss boys, who were more fun to play with, or hug them or whatever it was adults did behind closed doors. Boys were some of the best friends she had, but they weren't like they were in the movies. They were dirty, were loud, were grossed out by kissing and all that. So Maddie decided she would stay single and get a dog instead. She'd need a big dog to go ghost hunting with, something sturdy, not a small dog who ghosts might hurt. The subject of what kind of dog was the best kind was a very intricate one. She got books from the library to pour over, picturing each dog with her in the field with a red handkerchief around its' neck. Her father was allergic to cats, so she couldn't have a cat, and besides, cats didn't let people dress them up very often.

Of course she assumed she'd be in the field with her father fighting ghosts. Her, a dog, and her partner – what more could she need? Maddie could picture them living together in the future, drinking coffee, talking about papers, reviewing research and fighting bad guys. She would help him remember to get off the couch and go to bed and he would triple-check the house's security. They could watch old movies together inbetween saving the world from ghosts. It sounded like a perfect future to her, and it was while drawing in her room, thinking about the future, listening to the radio, that she first had the thought that she wouldn't mind being married to her dad. The thought was both foreign and oddly fitting. He was a nice guy. Nice like a prince in a Disney movie, polite, kind, understanding, the sort of guy a princess would want to kiss. Her dad was as close to a superhero as it got.

This was the secret she kept closest to her heart. Her dad loved her mom. Maddie was very sure of that fact. Besides which, she wasn't sure why, but she knew kissing someone you were related to was supposed to be gross. Her dad would think she was gross if she said anything, and to hear him say it would break her heart; he hadn't ever really been angry or disappointed in her, although he'd been concerned or unsure about her actions or words sometimes. The idea of him wrinkling his nose at her or thinking there was something wrong with her made her feel like crying. Alicia and her mom, too,

they'd think Maddie was gross if they knew. Everyone would.

That was okay. She could keep it from them anyway, and they'd all be happy.

When Maddie was eight, her parents divorced, abruptly and without warning.

There was no explanation forthcoming from her father, who was as stunned as she was. That was what she remembered later: the way his expression changed, back and forth between uncertainty and surprise. All the details, Alicia learned at school from older kids and repeated to her little sister in secret. When she repeated it to Maddie, she had a hard time understanding it. She walked around with an expression much like her father's as she tried to put the pieces together in her own head. Her mother was in love with someone else. She didn't love her husband anymore. And she and the other man had been caught doing… something, Maddie wasn't sure what, and then there was a big argument at her mother's workplace between her mom, her dad and the other man, who must have won somehow since now she was going to go marry him. Maddie didn't know why. This other guy didn't know how to make fancy bread for the holidays like her dad, wouldn't triple-check the locks to keep out bad guys or ghost-proof the house or buy music for her as a surprise for when she got back from work. This other guy didn't know how to make her momma's coffee or that the radio always had to be kept on the oldies' station.

Alicia thought maybe things were a little bit her dad's fault. He disappeared sometimes, he wouldn't talk about his parents or his family, he was cold and kind of creepy. She thought he should have been nicer to their mom and talked more. Maddie could see the guilt in her father's eyes when he simply nodded and said quietly, "You're probably right."

"Dad, don't say that!" She threw himself at him, wrapping her arms around him tightly, hating the way she could practically see his heart breaking on his face. "If you don't want to talk about stuff, that's probably because it's bad – that's not your fault."

Her sister fumed. "It's not Mom's fault she fell in love, either!"

Their father nodded, swallowing back other emotions and aiming for an air of neutrality. "That's right. She's in love with someone else, but more importantly, she still loves the two of you. She still cares for me, if not in the same way as before, and she won't want you two to fight over this. You know she hates it when you fight."

That pacified them for the moment. Even with those reassurances, though, Maddie didn't want to go live with her mother, but Alicia did. Alicia loved their mother more than anything in the world and it didn't take long before she accused Maddie of not loving their mom at all. Both their parents and the new guy (Maddie would *not* call him her step-father, she refused, she had a dad *he was right there*) told her never to say anything like that again. Still, Alicia was thinking it. She was angry at Maddie for not picking the same side when all Maddie wanted was for there not to be sides. She didn't want her parents to get a divorce. Her father didn't want it either. He looked like he was lost, like a kid in the park who had just turned around and realized nobody he knew was there. Maddie wished he would just tell her mom whatever she wanted to know so they could make up and be together again. Maddie also couldn't believe her mom was just walking away from someone who loved her so much. This wasn't how it went in the books Maddie read. Love was supposed to conquer everything. They loved each other, and that was supposed to make up for the rest of it. She hid in her treehouse, the one she and Alicia had pretended was the log cabin Alicia wanted to have one day, and cried the entire time that the new man, her mother and Alicia spent packing up their things.

Her father had to come get her. If she could have she would have lived in the treehouse forever, except it was scary to him when he couldn't find her, so she came down and back into the empty house that suddenly seemed huge, like one of those too-big mansions in black and white movies. The reality that they were gone, really gone, didn't hit until she was in bed. She couldn't hear Alicia snoring or the TV on playing those late night shows her mother liked. Everything was big, dark, and empty. More than once, Maddie jolted awake thinking she heard their car coming up the driveway. She waited for the door to open. Her mom would come back, say it was all a

mistake, tell Alicia to stop being mean, and lean way up on her tiptoes to kiss Maddie's dad just like before. Or he would go to her, tell her all the things he had been keeping from her, and she would forgive him and they'd come home together.

She spent two months this way, waking up and waiting and then drifting off. Her father made good breakfasts, she found out. He could make himself wake up on time to get her to school, driving her in the less-familiar second car they never really used before now. He bought her a scooter to ride home from school, a pretty one in teal, her favorite color, and he could braid her hair just fine. Maddie made things for dinner sometimes after reading a book comparing cooking to chemistry, which was a science she was interested in. Sometimes they cooked together. When he had the radio on the jazz station, the sleeves of his button-up shirt rolled up and food in the oven, they'd talk about her day and school and she kept getting the sense she should be happy. This wasn't like TV where men ran away from their families. Her dad loved her. Her mom did, too, she guessed, from farther away. Her new husband got a promotion somewhere down south too far away to visit very often. Still, Maddie was pretty sure her mom loved her anyway. Everyone said things were going to be okay.

It didn't help that sometimes her dad would be at work late into the evening. Worse was when he got a call and had to leave after dark. He could disappear without a sound, without a word to her or a note, vanishing seemingly into thin air. Alone in the house, she read and reread every book she owned, started making trips to the library to have things to keep out the lack of noise in the house, trying to fend off the creeping anxiety that made her stomach twist unpleasantly. *He's going to leave me too,* she thought, biting her lip so hard it bled. *Everyone else could so he could too – no, wait, what if a ghost got him, what if that's why he's not back yet, where is he where is he where is he-*

He got back at just past five in the morning the day summer break started to find her waiting in the hallway, still in her school clothes, having paced circles through the house so many times he could see the faint imprints of her smaller feet in the carpet and smeared on the hardwood floors. Before he could ask what happened, she threw herself at him, hugging him hard enough to hurt.

"You *scared* me!" she wailed, which was when he noticed one of his personal ghost hunting journals from his office in the chair she'd been waiting in. "I thought the grey-eyed ghost from your reports got you!"

Kneeling down to take her hands, he smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring manner. His face had a few more wrinkles than it'd had back when he was married, but his voice was the same calm, low tone it had always been and it was almost, *almost* enough. "Madeleine, I'm fine. Everything's okay-"

"No it's not!" Maddie interrupted, blinking back tears. "You were fighting a really dangerous ghost and you didn't tell me! You didn't leave me a note, or say when you were gonna be home, or, or, or…"

He pulled her into a hug. As if some internal switch had been flipped, she started crying without completely understanding why. His hands were long-fingered and strong and he smelled like forest smoke and cologne; he was comfortingly familiar, solid, real, in ways very little else was these days. She buried her face against his neck so she didn't have to look at him. Big girls didn't cry. She knew that, but she couldn't shut it off, and then she was pressing tiny kisses to his neck as he picked her up, like when she was in kindergarten and had skinned her knee. Back then her mother had been there to tousle her hair while telling her it was okay. The absence of that touch was substituted, as best it could be, by her father rubbing her back, shushing her, pressing affectionate kisses to the top of her head. (That used to be his and Alicia's thing. She missed Alicia. She was mad at her for leaving and mad at herself for not being brave enough to call her more often and confused on why it was all so *hard*.) Carrying her to the living room, he sat down on the couch to wait out the tears. It took a while, maybe because she'd been shoving it down for two months since, if she'd cried, he'd have heard and gotten worried.

"I'm always worried," he told her when she explained that to him. "So you might as well tell me right away from now on. It's better to know what to worry about instead of trying to figure it out."

She took one big, shuddering breath, then another. "I don't want you to leave."

He went still, voice taking on the same confused cadence it'd had throughout the divorce proceedings. "What? Madeleine Anne, how could you even think I'd leave you? I need you. Parents need kids, just like kids need parents. You give my life meaning, you're important, you're… well, you're my ghost hunting protégé, right?"

"Partner," she corrected him automatically. He snorted, in spite of the seriousness of the situation. "I mean it! I can help you hunt ghosts and look at things in the lab and write reports. You said I had to be ten and ten's a lot like eight."

"I could kick myself for saying that," he noted dryly, detangling her from his chest enough he could look her in the eyes. He ended up with her small hands in his, giving a frowning glance to where she'd chewed her nails out of anxiety. "I don't need you to be a professional ectobiologist before you hit the double digits, Leina. I really don't. All I need is for you to tell me when you're upset so I can make things better. I'd move mountains for you. You know that."

Her vision got blurry again at the nickname, the special nickname only her father called her. Being called Leina in that oddly accented way of his, *Ley-na*, each syllable foreign and familiar, made her seize up at the thought that if he left, she wouldn't have anyone left to call her that. "I need you to tell me when you're going away! I hate waking up all alone and I hate not knowing where you are and I get scared and – and – please just never do it again?"

"I promise." His blue eyes were so much bluer up close, she could get lost in the sincerity of the cerulean. She wanted to believe him. He pressed a kiss to the top of her hand like people in movies or old paintings did, and she giggled. "I'll be right here, Leina. For forever and a day. Okay?"

"Okay." She smiled, sniffling back any final tears. "Just don't do it again. I love you, you jerk."

And she leaned in and brushed a kiss to his mouth, and he jerked back like he'd been struck, body going tense underneath her. She froze in place, confused, uncomprehending. She'd been aiming for that thing her mother did, little kisses all over his cheeks, but she wasn't really sure how to do it right. Going off his reaction, she'd

obviously messed it up. *Oh God, he thinks I'm gross.* This wasn't that, though, and she tried to will the thought into him. It wasn't supposed to be a kiss-kiss, just a kind-of-kiss. But she didn't know how to put that in adult terms, so she watched his face closely for a reaction. His eyes were wide with semi-shock and something else she couldn't place. Disapproval? Anger? Was he mad? In books and the old movies he liked the heroine kissed the hero on the cheek and the music swelled and everything was good and perfect. She watched him visibly turn something over in his head, saw his expression become decision-making. Not wanting him to be mad, she bit her lip again, and the sight of blood seemed to snap him out of his thoughts.

"Oh, Leina, don't hurt yourself. Get up; I think I know where the lip balm is, and then we both need to hit the sack." Shaking his head, he exhaled a little sharply, turning his words over in his own head as he got up to hunt for wherever he'd stored the lip balm. "I… Leina, I need you not to tell anyone you did that. People would get the wrong idea. Can you promise me not to say anything?"

She blinked sleepily, yawning as she trailed after him. "Wrong idea? What do you mean?"

He seemed to be having a hard time looking at her. "Sometimes dads who do that with their kids hurt them. Then they take the kids away, to keep them safe. Do you understand? I don't want anyone to think I would hurt you, especially your mother or your sister – things are already difficult enough between us as it is without adding this to it."

Maddie didn't understand, not really. Her dad was only dangerous to ghosts. He wouldn't hurt humans, no matter what they did, and certainly not over a little kiss. Maddie could count on one hand the times he'd ever yelled where she could hear it. But other people, she reflected, probably wouldn't understand that. They wouldn't believe her if she said her dad was kind, because kids with mean parents always said their parents weren't mean on those crime dramas her dad watched. Nobody ever wanted to say it when their parents were bad. People were fundamentally good, and that meant they'd see something much worse going on than actually was. Maddie didn't understand exactly what people would think her dad was doing, but it didn't matter.

She promised anyway, because he looked as scared of losing her as she was of losing him, and she wasn't going to let that happen.

When she was ten, she went out on a ghost hunt with her dad.

He would later tell her he'd aged ten years in an hour that night. Maddie was fearless, undaunted by the possible danger, and good God, her climbing abilities had not decreased in the least since she was a little girl. Scrambling up trees to set up cameras, often balanced precariously, she practically glowed with excitement. He'd never seen a child so happy to get something as she was to get night-vision binoculars. The night was cold, foggy, humid, yet she could scarcely keep still. Brimming with barely-contained enthusiasm, her eyes were sharp when it was her turn on the binoculars and then on the camera feeds respectively. Their breath was coming out in the air. Snow threatened to turn the autumn into winter and make the night truly exhausting, making his sole government liaison call in and say he wasn't going to go out and do research in these conditions, not on his current paycheck, anyway.

As far as anyone else knew, he was running this operation solo. Observation only, he'd assured his boss, already aware that if Maddie wanted to, she'd dart out to try to apprehend a ghost without even entertaining the idea of checking with him. She was developing into a very independent young girl, one who made her own decisions. He was proud of her. Maddie studied harder of her own initiative than many kids did when nagged, she taught herself anything she could find a book for, and she was always thinking of others. One day she was going to be a highly-decorated and honored scientist. For now, she was stuck watching an abandoned glass factory with him in the middle of a forest in the tail end of autumn.

Two hours in, she let out a gasp and started to bolt. His hands locked around her wrist before she could, barely. "Leina, what is it?"

"It's out by the toolshed! If I sneak up on it, I can weaken it." She looked at him as if this were a totally rational plan. He remained unconvinced.

"No. You're not fast enough to dodge if it strikes, and I'm not risking

it. We go together or we don't go at all, young lady." When she glared at him and started to open her mouth to object, he added, "We're partners, right?"

"…right. Okay, fine. What's the new plan?"

The new plan was to have Maddie keep to the shadows with back up ammunition in case the new mixture her father and his friends had made at work wasn't as good at dissolving ghosts as they thought it would be. He himself was surprisingly adept at moving silently through the forest, somehow moving without the leaves of autumn snapping under his feet, ducking effortlessly behind trees, hard to spot even for Maddie, who knew exactly where to look for him. He kept low to the ground when he got closer to the ghost's last known location, banking on its' flight pattern keeping it from seeing him. Maddie felt the air get colder as the ghost manifested again, an eyeless, naked creature whose featureless white body was emaciated and gaunt. Its' arms and legs seemed to turn into shredded ligaments past the knees and elbows, dragging on the ground if it dipped too low. The creature's nose wriggled furiously, trying to sniff them out, faint rasping sounds emerging from its' ever-open mouth. As a child, it was terrifying. As a scientist, it was fascinating. She watched it, entranced, as it tilted its' head to try to inhale upwind, everything she'd ever learned from biology textbooks going through her mind as she tried to fathom how this thing worked.

Its' long arms were good for ensnaring humans in the jellyfish-like tentacles of shredded flesh. Maddie's father moved into position, his eyes the only colorful splash of blue in a grey and brown world. He caught her gaze and nodded once. The ten year old gripped her ghost-disarming gun tighter, ready for anything, as he carefully crept up on the ghost, who was lingering by the entrance of the toolshed, tentacle-ligaments creeping up the doorframe like vines.

Before he could even fire, its' head snapped in his direction and tentacles wrapped around his ankles, hauling him off his feet and forward through the autumn leaves. Maddie shrieked, but shot off three rounds directly into the thing's chest and a fourth at its' head, bolting forward. The howling of the ghost echoed through the forest as its' grip loosened on the human's ankles, and Maddie helped haul him free with her heart racing. Her father scrambled for his gun,

which was back where he'd been originally, as Maddie took point to provide cover fire. She dimly registered him telling her to fall back, but the ghost was turning towards him and that scared her. It wasn't aiming for her. She might as well have not been there, the way it was acting.

"You… have a child…" it spoke, freezing them both in their respective positions before he lunged for the gun, taking aim in a blur of motion.

"Don't even *think* about touching her," he said, in a voice wholly devoid of regret or compassion. "I will make sure your remains are never found for as long as the GIW is active-"

Maddie fired at the thing again, piercing its' side. When it hissed, she could smell something acidic that seemed to climb into her senses and sear out everything else. Turning its' useless head towards her, it spoke again in that gravel-on-pavement voice. "You… would defend… this murderer?"

She swallowed past the urge to choke on the smell. "He's my partner! Of course I'm going to help him. Do ghosts not know anything about love?" Her purple eyes flashed a warning to her father: *I don't know how long stalling will work. You have to shoot, now.*

Unfortunately, he was reluctant to shoot with the ghost's attention directly on her, staying his hand for a moment. Maddie hadn't ever really seen him like this, cold, calculating expression, eyes violently blue, skin so pale in the faint October light, swathed in dark colors like a shadow. He would kill this speaking, thinking thing, and he would do it for her without regrets or shame. She took a strategic step back as the ghost drifted forward, inhaling slowly to steady herself, trying to keep her aim towards the chest since the headshot had glanced off. Her gaze was torn between her father and the ghost – the one she had to protect and what she was protecting him from.

"How foolish… to bring a human you love… into this," it rasped, head turning to 'stare', eyeless, at her father for a moment. "Vincent… does she… know?"

He let out a breath that came out blue, like a plume of pastel chalk

dust that he hadn't been able to force back. Maddie stared, uncomprehending.

His response was terse and to the point: "No."

It drifted backwards, tendons and ligaments dragging through the leaves. "Take her… and consider this… your Samhain blessing."

"What-" she started to say, only for her father to cut her off.

"Agreed. Leina, come here. We're leaving." His voice was iron, though his grip on his gun hadn't relaxed any, nor had he lowered it an inch. She knew there was no arguing with him, not with that tone. "We need to go."

The ghost retreated into the woods, phasing through some trees despite its' legs dragging against the ground. He watched it retreat as she carefully approached, struck by the tension in his body still, the adrenaline still keeping him on alert until it was out of sight and they could no longer hear its' wheezing. Slowly, he lowered the gun, exhaling a long sigh. Relief flickered over his features for a moment before he looked at her. He waited for her to say something. She waited for words to come. A few strands of his dark hair, normally perfectly slicked back, had fallen forward into his face from the initial impact. Somehow, the way it framed his face made him look oddly akin to the messy-haired ghost. Maddie brushed the thought away to clear her throat.

"What was it – she? – talking about, Dad?" Idly, she reached into her pocket and pulled out some tissues, leaning up to press them on a scrape on his face. "What's a Samhain blessing?"

He glanced at the treeline again, voice subdued. "Sometimes ghosts will agree not to kill someone near one of their holidays."

She blinked, confused. "I thought you said they didn't feel?"

"They don't," he said, a second too late, as if there were something he wasn't telling her. "But the ones with some human memories still have instincts left that tell them not to do bad things, and that seems to manifest more acutely around dates that held significance during

their lifetime. Your age may also have helped trigger latent remnants of sympathy."

He was talking a touch too fast. He wouldn't meet her eyes quite yet, mouth pressed into a thin line, breathing slightly uneven. Her father was so still that when he grabbed her hand and pulled it away from his cheek in what was probably meant to be his usual 'I'm fine, nothing's wrong' sort of way, his sudden movements startled her. She sucked in a breath, taking a half step back. Perhaps it was a trick of the light, but his cerulean eyes seemed to glow as he stared down at her, silent and unreadable. The world was quiet all around them, eerie and serene in equal measures. As the first few flakes of snow drifted lazily down to Earth, he watched her watch him with an intensity whose reasoning she couldn't understand.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asked softly, startling her.

"What? No."

"But you know I haven't told you everything about what I do."

It was less a question, more of a statement, so she didn't reply right away. She turned the events that had just happened over in her head, replayed the words the ghost had said to try to discern the hidden meanings. "You've talked to ghosts. I think. And they know something about you that's bad. Or," she amended thoughtfully, "Maybe not bad, but something you don't want other people to know."

"…something like that," he admitted after a pause, belatedly releasing her wrist. Maddie fidgeted with her braid, unsure of what else to say or do. "I don't think I know how to explain it to you. Not because you're young, or due to a lack of intelligence, it's… it's just not something I can do, after your mother left. I can't lose you, too."

She stepped closer and grabbed his hands, which were clenched into fists at his side, in hers. "I won't. I don't know what's going on, but I know *you*. You're the good guy, Dad. You're a scientist, you're one of the only people who's ever published real scientific papers on ghosts, you try to keep everybody safe, you're Vincent Mangion: *the* ghost hunter. I'm glad you're my dad. I'm not going to just leave."

He tugged her close, pulling her into a hug. His skin was cold as ever, heartbeat irregular under her ear as she rested her head on his chest. Maybe some tiny part of her knew the truth, deep down, but some other part of her couldn't imagine it when her father was so loving, so worried, so himself. Her whole life she'd accepted the coldness and unsteady heartbeat as parts of him. She could keep accepting it now. Whatever was going on, it was okay. They didn't need to tell each other everything. Maddie trusted him to tell her what she needed to know when she needed to know it. Her only worry was making sure that he knew, in the meantime, that whatever the secret was, she would never, ever leave him over it. Maddie was his daughter, his partner, a future scientist, and she knew he was a good person, or else he wouldn't have worked so hard to keep other people safe.

"I love you," he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead, then to her temple. "I love you, Leina. I know this is all confusing and crazy and I'm sorry, but please, please believe me when I say I love you."

"I do," she said without hesitation, and he leaned down to look her in the eyes, deadly serious.

"There are some things I can't tell you. I'll never be able to, but it's not about you. It's not anything you have or haven't done." His eyes were younger than the rest of him, she thought, the eyes of someone young and scared and confused. "If I tell you all my secrets, ghosts will come after you in ways I can't save you from. They'll kill you. And Leina, if someone killed you, I would kill *myself*." The certainty with which he said it, as if it were a premeditated decision, drove the air from her lungs unpleasantly. She didn't doubt him. "I couldn't live without you. I love you, no matter how many secrets I have to keep from you to keep you safe."

"I love you too," she echoed back, then leaned forward and kissed him before he could pull away.

His lips were cool, smooth, vaguely inhumanly so, like marble but softer. She forgot how to breathe. One of his hands tangled in her hair, cradling her close, gentle and undemanding. The smell of his cologne was reassuring, warm in the cool autumn air, mixed with the smell of his leather jacket and the faintest trace of cigarette smoke from the bar he sometimes went to with his friends. Her eyes shut

automatically, a reflex she wasn't aware of. In the darkness of the fall forest as night fell, the world seemed like something beautiful, an illustration out of an old book of fairytales, the kind that the librarian said weren't alright for kids to read that she read anyway. Her heart was hammering in her chest. Her hands shook as she wrapped her arms around his torso under his shirt, hiding herself away under his coat. She pressed her lips against his when he started to lean away, leveraging her grip on his back. His breath caught, audibly, as she shifted against him, but he swallowed and seemed to come to his senses, pulling away from her.

He couldn't look directly at her. "That's – that's a different kind of love, Madeleine, than what I meant."

"I know," Maddie nodded, not letting go of him, nestling her head against his chest. "But you feel it too, don't you?"

"…don't *do* this to me," he half-whispered, shutting his eyes and breathing in slowly. "Even if you weren't my – even if we weren't – Leina, the ghosts I fight would never leave you alone if we-"

"Then I'll fight them!" she declared, bold as brass. "I'll catch them, dissect them, and figure out how to keep them away from humans, forever! I'll keep you safe. I'll save *everybody*."

With a quiet sigh, he pulled away from her, taking her by the hand to lead her back to the observation station and then home where, hopefully, they could go back to being normal. He didn't tell her that he didn't believe her or that she couldn't do it. Her father would never say anything that cold to her – to any of the interns at the GIW, sure, but he was different with her. She still felt the weight of his disbelief in his actions, in how he kept his eyes off of hers, in the secrets he was keeping from her to protect her. Sometimes her father seemed ancient in ways that she couldn't explain. He was always waiting for the next disaster to hit, reluctant to so much as consider the idea of things improving, and her heart ached for him.

She'd fix the world, rid it of ghosts, and then he'd see. Then he'd finally be happy.

Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

> I would like to cordially apologize to the fine people of Malta for butchering your language via my OC.

Normal, for Maddie and Vincent Mangion, was a series of moments and a series of routines.

In the mornings, she woke up to him making coffee, which he drank black and which she drank with a slurry mix of cream, milk and sugar. They would put the news on, having breakfast together while half-listening in the early morning light. He'd be reading or writing some ghost-related report or something, usually, unless he'd gone to bed reading. Then he'd have a book at the table, serenely sipping coffee as he finished it. Maddie would cook despite his objections, eager to prove that she, as an amateur chemist, could handle the challenge of putting breakfast together. They ate and read and listened in perfect bliss. He drove her to school with the radio turned to an oldies station, talked amicably to her as they drove and told her to have fun when he dropped her off.

Each moment was precious, part of their routine, and she loved it all. She loved the way he threw her clothes in the dryer on cold days to give her something warm to change into, as if the chill was too much to let her try to handle. She loved the way he death-glared the kids at school that were mean to her through the car windows. Most of all, she loved the kiss to the top of her head as he dropped her off. One of her friends joked he was babying her, but Maddie didn't mind. All in all, she had a pretty good dad, and pretty good luck. On the news and on TV, there were all kinds of kids whose dads didn't pay attention to them after the divorce. Maddie's mom called at least once a week, and her stepfather… well, he tried to be nice, she guessed. If he didn't insist on having her over for the holidays, she'd have liked him better. She didn't want to go to that strange house where her increasingly moody sister continued to vacillate between being

normal and giving her the silent treatment. More than anything, she hated her mother's coded questions about how she was doing, like her father couldn't be trusted to take care of her. Things were good. They split the housework, like partners, and after cleaning everything on Sunday periodically, they'd get ice cream or go to the movies together.

Her father always left notes about where he was going and when he expected to be back. When she woke up to an empty house, it was never again without a trace of where he went, and that meant the world to her.

More often, though, he was making an effort not to be out at all hours of the night in the first place, especially if she was having friends over. When her friends came to her house, they were always envious of how mellow her father was. "Stay up as late as you like," he told them during sleepovers. "I'll be in my office if you need anything. First-Aid kit's by the couch, phone's all yours if you need to go home early, just don't break anything and we're fine. Madeleine, you can handle it from here." Then he'd vanish into his office, not to be seen until they woke up to the smell of freshly cooked breakfast. Once, he'd walked in on Maddie and her friends Yolanda and Josephine watching an R rated horror movie and, as the two girls froze (Maddie continued watching, unfazed), casually asked if they wanted him to order pizza before it got too late. The only dad-ish thing he said about the movie was that watching TV in the dark was bad for their eyes, but he didn't force them to turn on the lights. More than once, her father agreed to pick up one of Maddie's friends that lived further out into the woods, some of whom hadn't ever gotten to go to a sleepover before.

"Your dad is cool," Yolanda told Maddie one night, as the clock struck two. "I get why you're such a daddy's girl now. I'd be one too if my dad let me set my own bedtime."

Maddie shrugged, popping some popcorn into her mouth. The term daddy's girl didn't embarrass her, but instead instilled a sort of warm glow in her. *She* was her father's favorite, not Alicia, and since Alicia got to have their mom all to herself, that was fair. "He kind of sets it? If I stay up too late then he won't cover for me if I fall asleep at school or my grades slip."

Josephine, Josie to her friends, snorted. "That is *not* the same. Normal dads are not this cool, Mads. Especially not about what you wear, ugh." Her nose crinkled as she recalled her own father.

If there was one thing Vincent Mangion had no idea how to set up a routine for, it was clothes shopping. He was well-dressed, but he'd reduced it to a science, scribbling out specifications for clothing based on common denominators among other men's clothing he observed. Women's clothing was baffling and children's clothing was beyond him. More than once, he simply told Maddie their budget, drove her to a store and let her pick things out for herself. The result was a wardrobe full of teal, thrift store finds of old saddle shoes and cloche hats. There was nothing she was forbidden to indulge in, no matter how hard he rolled his eyes when she tried to explain the inherent coolness of bellbottoms or tie-dye. The seventies were starting to die, but her love for them hadn't, so she simply hung up her prettiest tie-dyed shirts on the wall of her room when she outgrew them. Bored one night when he was working late, she'd ventured into the basement, gotten his old paints and tried to do a mural on her wall like the kind she'd read about in books. His lack of anger subsequently made him the coolest dad in history among her friends; when her friends heard that he got her a book on how to paint flowers, he was elevated to the realm of the one truly cool adult in the world. Maddie was oddly proud to call him hers.

(She knew it was wrong. She knew it was wrong and bad and not okay, but ever since his non-answer in the woods when she was ten she'd been unable to shake the breathtaking high she got when she thought about kissing him. Maddie wasn't stupid, she understood all the reasons she shouldn't even think that way about him, and yet that just made her love him more. If she was a weirdo with something seriously wrong with her, as she suspected she was, he never told her that or treated her like she was messed up. He was as nice to her as ever. It made her secretly glad, that if this was some kind of screwed up phase, he'd be there through it and after it. It made him easier to love. His love was pure and non-judgmental, in a world that often seemed to be the opposite of both. If he thought he'd fixed anything by how he acted that night, he was wrong.)

For the most part, she lived in a bubble of freedom and routine.

There was a cozy quality to knowing what he was doing that had left her without the anxiety of before, when he hadn't told her where he was going. She had the feeling that sometimes he wasn't honest with her, but that wasn't something he could help, was it? After all, he was only trying to protect her from the ghosts. Perhaps that was why he didn't let himself love her the way she loved him. Or maybe he was really worried about hurting her, as he'd indicated back when she was eight. Either way, he was doing his best and she was okay with that. Every time she got upset or angry with her mother or sister, he'd buy her something, a ring or a bracelet, something small and intricate and beautiful to ease the pain in her heart. A lot of it had gemstones believed in ancient times to repel bad spirits. He told her that as if he needed to justify getting her things. Her mom always said men were bad at touchy-feely things, so Maddie made sure to hug him and tell him thank you.

The bubble popped whenever she went to visit her mom, Alicia, and George, her step-dad. They lived far enough away that she had to take a plane to visit them, which wouldn't have been so bad, if Maddie's mother hadn't made it clear that her ex-husband was barely tolerated. Vincent still called her Ammy, but she insisted he refer to her as Amaryllis, and while he offered to have them come over to his place her refusal was instant and seemingly permanent. She wanted her picture-perfect family with her new husband, her new home, and her two perfect children. Unfortunately for Amaryllis, Maddie wasn't perfect. Alicia wasn't, either, but Alicia lived with her so she was a little nicer to her. It wasn't hard to miss that Vincent doted on Alicia whenever he got the chance to see her, as if no time had passed, while Amaryllis grew less and less able to put up with Maddie's eccentricities. Everything from the science book she brought to read on the plane to her favorite cloche hat were subject to disapproving looks and scrutiny. Christmas and Easter were the most tense, usually, and she tried to take some comfort in how far apart they were.

Thanksgiving when she was eleven, Alicia wouldn't talk to her, preferring to talk secretively to their cousin Jessica about *something*. Whatever it was, it must have been important. Maddie tried not to feel unwanted sitting there at the table, tried to talk to her dad inbetween bites while her step-dad talked about his job to Maddie's

mom and his parents, who disapproved of Maddie's long hippie-style hair and boyish saddle shoes. The meal seemed to drag on forever, all chatting people who she didn't know and people she knew who didn't care to know her, and she couldn't bear the thought of staying there overnight, sleeping in a house full of people who didn't like her. She leaned over to her dad and told him quietly, "I don't want to stay here tonight. Can I stay with you?"

His reply came after a pause. "Leina, your mother doesn't get to see you much. She'd really like it if you stayed here over the break."

"She won't even talk to me," Maddie pointed out, glancing over at her oblivious mother. "I don't want to be here. Please?"

Vincent's too-blue eyes flickered over to her mother, then to her. "I'll talk to her about it after dinner."

"So," her step-dad cut in, a little rudely, in Maddie's opinion, "Vincent. Amaryllis says you're Maltese?"

Maddie could see the discomfort in her father's politeness as he straightened up, detect his disdain for having everyone's eyes at the table on him. "Yes. And you're what, German? British? I've known Wolfmanns from both countries."

Usually, the way her dad moved past people's questions in blunt, one-word answers got them to drop it. George, though, persisted. "Vincent, though, that's not a Maltese name, is it?"

"My mother was Italian." That, along with his father's nationality, was all he'd ever said to his family about his parents. Again attempting to force a subject change, he looked over at Alicia and noted proudly, "Alicia excels in languages. I taught her some Italian when she lived with me; you should look into getting her a tutor. Unless French is cooler these days? I'm not exactly hip to the lingo."

Alicia snorted, looking at her plate as their cousin Jessica asked, impressed, "You know Italian?"

"I'm okay at it," she reluctantly admitted, but her father wasn't about to let her downplay her own talents, not when George was looking at

him with another question in his eyes.

"Alicia and I used to talk in Italian sometimes to impress her friends," he informed the table, looking incredibly proud of her and her accomplishments. "We also used to sing in it – oh, don't blush, Al, it's a gift. She's as good at languages as Maddie is with science. You'd be amazed how quickly she picks things up once you set them in front of her; she's got a real aptitude for it."

With the focus switched over to Alicia, who Maddie coaxed into saying some of the Italian she remembered, Vincent relaxed enough to approach his ex-wife. They excused themselves to talk while Maddie, grateful that no one was going to mention how unladylike her interest in science was, goaded her sister into talking about that time she'd tried writing in Italian. Somehow it had never struck Maddie as odd that their father had working knowledge of at least Spanish, Italian and Maltese. She'd always taken it for granted that it was simply the way things were. That said, she was glad to see Alicia light up under the attention, see her smile as she coached her grandparents through how to say thank you and goodnight and other basic words. Alicia was getting moodier the longer she lived with her mother, the more she was forbidden to spend whole days in the forest digging and climbing trees and exploring. Now the life came back into her eyes. Maddie resisted the urge to hug her; seeing her confident again felt *right*. They caught each other's eyes and shared a grin. *Maybe Alicia's not mad at me,* Maddie reevaluated. *Maybe she's just been sad in the city. I should ask Dad if tomorrow we can all go out ice skating like we used to.*

When Vincent and Amaryllis returned to the table, Amaryllis gave Maddie a disappointed look, one of many that evening. Maddie politely pretended not to notice. She liked how untouchable her father seemed when he acted as if he didn't notice or care what people thought. That kind of poise was hard to imitate, but she liked to think she could do an okay job if it meant keeping the peace. After that, the conversation moved off of Alicia onto George's mother Christabel, who was very nice even if she wasn't really Maddie's grandmother. She insisted everyone call her Chrissy and regaled them with some stories from when she'd spent a year in college in Italy. The atmosphere eased somewhat for Maddie, who leaned sleepily

against her father's shoulder mid-dessert, surprisingly tired and yet still able to hum *Azalea* by Louis Armstrong to herself. Still, despite herself, she found herself wondering about her father.

He spoke multiple languages. When she questioned him about where he lived when he was growing up, he only ever mentioned a lake, swimming with his friends and staying up late. There were obviously holes in his stories, which perhaps was why he told so few of them. At some point, Maddie knew logically, he must have had parents. He was Maltese. She'd looked up where it was on a map once, and it wasn't super far from Italy. His mother was Italian – was, past tense. So she was probably dead. The way he looked away whenever Maddie tried to bring her up suggested she was dead, anyway, which was kind of hard to imagine. It didn't seem right that George's parents and Maddie's mother's parents were all still alive while her father had no one. If he had siblings, he didn't mention them at any point. Every so often, he would say, "My father always said…" when reciting a piece of ghost lore he knew. Was his father a ghost hunter, too, or was he just someone who liked old stories about them? And even at eleven and a half, it hadn't escaped her notice that Vincent Mangion lived beyond his means. He treated money as if it were a given, in a way that her rich step-father did not. George flaunted his wealth by keeping up with the latest things while Vincent simply approached the world as if he could buy anything in it without question, something that came across in his flat assessment of the cost of things in the new house. He *knew* what things cost off the top of his head, which wasn't normal. Did Maddie have wealthy, foreign grandparents once upon a time?

She had never considered it, but if she'd had to choose, she privately thought she would take having a dad and some money rather all the money and no dad. Unaware of her surroundings when her father picked her sleeping form up, she curled against him tighter, breathing in deeply, as if unconsciously trying to memorize the feel and scent of him before she lost him.

When she woke up, she was on the bed in his hotel room and he was asleep in the spare bed the hotel had brought up. Maddie lay awake for a few minutes listening to his breathing, slow and nearly silent, but steady and *real* in all the ways that mattered.

When Maddie is forty-one, she will hear her daughter talk about predators.

Jazz will sit at the breakfast table pouring over her books, explaining how someone works their way into a child's life and twists things, rearranges them so that the child can be abused, and she will find herself shaken and mute where she sits, coffee going cold in her mug.

"Right, so one section I kept having to rework in my paper was the isolation bit. That can take a lot of different forms," Jazz will say with utter obliviousness to her mother's racing thoughts. "But a big one is creating secrecy around the relationship."

"*Your mother would take you out of my custody if she caught wind of this. You know that as well as I do."*

"*Other people wouldn't approve of your field work. Never tell them about this, or they'll inevitably make me stop taking you along."*

"*Don't tell the interns, but I trust your objectivity more than theirs most of the time."*

"The other thing that people get wrong is how building up trust works for these relationships. Sometimes it's all flattery, but a lot of times there's a lot of putting on an air of authority. Which I guess makes sense; you can't trust someone if they aren't smart in your eyes, you know?"

"*Ghosts don't have feelings. No matter what you think you saw in the field today, that was only a ruse, Leina. Don't let yourself be fooled so easily by false sentiment."*

"*Next time, don't ask questions, just shoot."*

"*Ley Line Theory has neither been scientifically verified as true nor debunked, therefore, we will choose caution over taking the risk of getting ambushed and caught unaware. Do you understand? I can't lose you."*

"*The sheer level of ectoradiation present in any being colloquially referred to as a ghost would make hybridization with humans largely unviable even if it were possible. We shouldn't waste our time on farfetched theoreticals."*

"*You're a natural, Leina, the best chemist I've seen in a decade. No, I'm not just saying that due to familial bias; I wouldn't bring your notes with me to work if it were mere flattery."*

"*Whatever the religious biases of the local population, we are scientists. We must look at the situation devoid of the social construct of faith and under the cold, harsh light of truth. I trust you to understand. You've always understood me."*

"*Anything that ghost says about humans is a lie. That doesn't only extend to me, it extends to everyone – they build false narratives around the faulty information their misfiring neurology gives them. Don't you trust me?"*

Jazz will throw up a hand and sigh, "The worst and most confusing thing is that they spoil the victim – how am I supposed to object to that as a psychologist? Family and friends are supposed to spoil you as a kid, that's part of being a kid in a loving family! Ugh, it'd help so much if the books told me where the line is between normal spoiling and weird levels. Not everybody who gives a kid a gift is on the prowl. I guess maybe it's the frequency more than anything else…"

"*Do you like your new encyclopedia set? I thought it might cheer you up since Alicia hasn't called lately."*

"*Here, this is for you. You're going to need nice jewelry for middle school, after all. My precious girl, growing up so fast…"*

"*Qalbi, dearest, you can take today off, alright? I'll call the school and tell them you're sick. You deserve a long weekend."*

"*Alright, now, this is a major violation of professional ethics, but I'm going on an independent investigation next month up north, and if you'd like to come along, I'll make it happen. Yes, I'm serious. I promised you I wouldn't leave you, Leina."*

"*Don't get any ideas. I bought it from a jewelers but it isn't a* wedding *ring, Leina, it's just – well. It is what it is. Besides, your smile is worth the money and the ensuing awkwardness. I love you, too."*

Jazz will ask her mother what's wrong, but Maddie will never tell

her, never, can't put it into words. That would be an admission of guilt, not on her part but on the part of her father, and he is, God rest his soul, many things, but not a predator. He loved her in a way other people could never understand. He didn't hurt her, would never have dreamed of it, and she will wish she could explain things to Jazz in a way that her daughter could understand. She will lay awake constructing her defenses of her father's actions, his words, night after night, and she will tell herself the anxious churning of her stomach is simply indignation, not anxiety. There is no reason to be anxious, because she is not a victim, not *prey*, and her father did not catch her, she threw herself at him wholeheartedly. They were not a statistic, were scientific anomalies, abnormal pieces of data unsuitable for the baseline teachings of Jazz's textbooks.

She will tell herself this for as long as it takes for her to believe it.

Maddie was twelve when she first heard her father having a nightmare.

He normally slept lightly, quickly, rising within three to four hours of laying down, so she knew something was wrong when she made the coffee and he wasn't up. He'd gone to bed at half past nine; for him not to be up when it was already half past five was crazy. Rather than trudging back to her room to leave the coffee as a surprise for him (he'd drink it, no matter how old, with zeal), she found herself cautiously padding over to his bedroom door. In the surprising cold of a summer morning before the sun was truly risen, his room somehow seemed the coldest of all, the darkest, too, with all the windows he had blocked out with heavy curtains. Somehow, to Maddie, he didn't seem like the big, bold ghost hunter she'd always known, laying in bed with the sheets clutched in his hands tightly. His body shook, faint shivers that didn't seem to have a cause, and she found herself wishing she knew Maltese. She wished she knew enough about languages to know if it *was* Maltese that he was speaking.

What she did know was that he was covered in cold sweat, hopelessly tangled up in the blankets, shaking uncontrollably. "Dad?" she ventured quietly, stepping into the room. He gave no response, and alarm shot through her in a jolt. "Dad, it's me."

Nothing. She drew closer, letting the door shut behind her on its' old, rusty hinges. The near-darkness was broken up by the corners of the windows letting in shards of light that fell onto his face in small patches. His skin was pale as it ever was, yet somehow the sight wasn't reassuring. Unsure of what to do, Maddie placed her hands on his shoulders and shook him, an uneven amount of pressure. Normally she'd barely touch her hand to his body before he was awake. Now, breath coming fast, he was immobilized, brow furrowing only slightly at the touch. She wasn't clear on why this scared her, only that it did, to the point she found herself climbing onto the bed next to him.

"Ma nafx, ma nafx, ahfirli, jien m'għamilt xejn! Itlaq, jekk jogħġbok-"

"Dad?" Maddie grabbed his shoulders, hard. Her untrained ears struggled to pick out the sounds of the unknown language, which had to be Maltese and not Italian, which she and Alicia still knew the rhythms of, or Spanish, which didn't have the harsh clattering of consonants against each other like that. She wished she knew what he was saying so that she could tell him it was alright. "Dad, snap out of it, it's okay, I'm here, okay?"

"-Omm, jekk jogħġbok, Omm, inħ-"

"*Vincent!*" Maddie half-shouted, sharply, cutting him off mid-syllable. "Vincent, *wake up!*"

His eyes opened, impossibly bright in the darkness, the only splash of color in the world. He blinked up at her, hair disheveled for the first time in her memory, breathing still labored. In rapid flickers of glances he took in the world around him. The familiar contours of the room, the smell of Maddie's lilac shampoo, the curve of the bed underneath him, it all set in bit by bit. She patiently waited alongside him for the worst of it to pass. Although she didn't know what to say, she knew she could be there to at least show that she cared, like Snow White's Prince standing above the princess's bed. A familiar twang went through her when that unparalleled blue gaze landed on her. Maddie had never seen him afraid before. The pain on his face was unmistakable. Hastily, she brushed away the tears threatening to form in his eyes, her own fair skin positively dark against his. (*Ghostly pale*, a little voice in her head whispered.)

"You're okay," she murmured, even a soft voice seeming loud in the silence they found themselves in. He released his death grip on the sheets to capture her hand in his, keeping her anchored close. For the first time since she was ten, she saw him at a loss for words, and hastened to fill in the gap. "I know you don't want to talk about it, and that's okay. You don't have to. I can listen if you want to talk, or I can just stay here. Okay? You're okay."

He pulled her into his arms and held on for dear life. She was startled by the faint aftershocks of tremors in his arms, less so by his silence. This was the genesis, she knew now from Alicia, of many of her parent's fights. Time after time, he hadn't been able to open up, hadn't been able to force the words out. At some point Amaryllis' patience gave way to frustration and then anger. Maddie, however, was a scientist. She knew that emotions, like other stimuli, needed time to fade before anything else could be attempted. If she gave him time and perhaps a distraction, that could be enough. Acting on impulse, she hugged him back, frowning at the breakneck pace of his heartbeat, irregular as ever, underneath her. Her father's voice when he spoke in Maltese was a rarity, but it had always been beautiful, natural, like an old piece of a puzzle clicking back into place. To hear his voice filled with fear was unsettling in ways she couldn't put to words. She could only imagine how *he* felt about it.

At some point, he stirred, making her shift and roll her shoulders uncomfortably. "Sorry," he muttered, his accent pronounced for the first time in a long, long time. "I shouldn't have-" Vincent released his grip on her, shamefaced. "I didn't mean to bother you."

Maddie shook her head, lightly. "It's okay," she murmured into his chest. "You've always been there for me when I have bad dreams. You're allowed to have some, too."

He didn't reply, threading his fingers instead through her long hair. He breathed in deeply. In the shirt he wore to bed, the top mostly unbuttoned, she could see a scar on his chest, oddly grey-colored and faded, curving up from the right of center of his chest up to his shoulder. Almost reverently, she ran her fingers along it, wondering. Maddie wasn't sure she wanted to know the story behind it. That she couldn't protect everyone she loved was a violent kind of truth she wasn't ready to face, not yet. His wintry skin went from normally

textured to abnormally smooth when her fingers moved across the scar, chasing it up until her hand was cupping his shoulder, one arm protectively clasped over his chest. How old the scar was, she couldn't hazard a guess. She wasn't even sure if this was what he was having nightmares about. All she knew was that she would pick up a real, non-ghost-ready gun and shoot someone to keep him from hurting if she thought it would help him.

"Leina," he breathed out, voice a half-whisper, half-breath, it was so soft, "If I asked you to do something hard, could you do it for me, no matter what?"

"Yeah," she promised without hesitation, violet eyes meeting his evenly. "Of course."

Vincent paused, turning something over in his head before settling on, "I want you to promise me that you'll always believe me, no matter what I say. I can't – I can't always prove what I say, and I know that sometimes it doesn't make sense, but I know what I know, and I wouldn't tell you pointless lies."

She nodded into the fabric of his shirt. "I promise. It's okay. I just…"

"You just?" he prompted gently, when she trailed off. He wasn't expecting her to snuggle up to him harder, as if she expected him to pull away.

"I wish I could stay with you in here and chase the nightmares away like you did for me." Maddie bit her lip, nervously, before offering, "I mean, I could. I won't tell anyone, and there's nothing wrong with needing somebody, right? That's what you always said when I was younger.

The fight between knowing he should tell her to leave this instant and the deeper desire for her to stay was excruciating. Maddie could see it on his face, feel it in the way his body tensed, and she stayed quite still, hoping against hope for him to make the arguably 'bad' decision. She wanted him to do the 'wrong' thing because it was okay if it was them, it *was*, he wasn't a bad person and she wasn't a terrible person to love, either. So long as they didn't do anything that hurt anyone, then why oh why should it matter to them or anyone else?

(That she could be the one to get hurt failed to cross her mind at the same time it was crossing his. They were parallel in this way, opposite in mentality in the same breath as one another, more times than either realized.) Maybe if she were better with words she could have made her case better to him. Perhaps if he wasn't fresh off of a breakdown he could have verbalized a caveat or two. Maddie wished she were better at Italian or Spanish or Maltese so she could plead her case in a foreign tongue with her hair done up like the fancy women in movies with subtitles her father was so fond of renting. Vincent wished he'd invested in a lock on his bedroom door and that he were better at lying in the face of those beautiful purple eyes.

Instead he opened up the covers for her and she crawled underneath them eagerly, pressing her warm body against his until his own perpetual chill left him, and he fell asleep with his fingers tangled in her hair, a softness that drowned out the sharp edges and jagged wounds of the past. She listened to his heartbeat, trying to find the rhythm in the uneven spaces between the beats, until his breathing quieted and she drifted off. Funny, she always had a hard time sleeping in rooms other than her own, but she could do it just fine there that morning.

It was even easier the second time, and the time after that.

When Maddie was twenty-two and Jack proposed to her, she never told him his was only the second prettiest ring she'd ever been given.